edexcel

Examiners' Report/ Principal Examiner Feedback

June 2011

GCE Music Technology (6MT03)
Paper 01
Portfolio 2

Edexcel is one of the leading examining and awarding bodies in the UK and throughout the world. We provide a wide range of qualifications including academic, vocational, occupational and specific programmes for employers.

Through a network of UK and overseas offices, Edexcel's centres receive the support they need to help them deliver their education and training programmes to learners.

For further information, please call our GCE line on 0844 576 0025, our GCSE team on 0844 576 0027, or visit our website at www.edexcel.com.

If you have any subject specific questions about the content of this Examiners' Report that require the help of a subject specialist, you may find our **Ask The Expert** email service helpful.

Ask The Expert can be accessed online at the following link:
http://www.edexcel.com/Aboutus/contact-us/

June 2011
Publications Code US028507
All the material in this publication is copyright
© Edexcel Ltd 2011

General Introduction

The overall impression is that this year's submission is a similar standard to last year, though the integrated sequencing tasks perhaps presented more difficulties to the weaker candidates. Recording work continues to show some very strong submissions at the top end, and overall this task is usually the best standard of the three. Composing using technology again had a wide range of responses, at the top end centres are embracing the use of technology in sound design and putting this to good musical use on the context of compositions, but a large number of submissions still ignore the requirement to get actively involved with creative sound design.

Equipment levels show that centres are making appropriate choices in the majority of cases, more than was the case even a few years ago. Recording equipment, sequencing programs and computer based instruments are now almost universally of a suitable standard to complete high quality work. Where there may be an issue is in the use of studio monitors and a suitable listening environment. Candidates should be encouraged to check all work on a regular basis using studio monitors rather than headphones and final mixes should always be completed on monitors where practical – certainly for recordings.

There was an alarming number of submissions that contained approaches to the work that are not permitted – the use of downloaded MIDI files for task 3A and the sharing of audio by different candidates for both tasks 3A and 3B. This is plagiarism and can result in candidates being disqualified from examinations.

There were a few other instances of non-permitted approaches, such as use of sequenced material in the recording task.

Centres are reminded of their obligations in signing the declaration in the log book, thus stating that the work is carried out in accordance with the specification.

Task 3A: Sequenced Integrated Performance

Headlines

- Missing or incomplete instrumental parts continue to be a problem
- Rhythm was frequently rigid and mechanical or, in the case of the Madonna task, there were incorrect drum patterns
- Musical subtlety and detail were often lacking
- Lack of attention to articulation and dynamics
- Capture of audio was often done fairly well
- Integration of audio often with problems in balance, EQ, effects use and dynamics processing

The two pieces given as stimuli this year, Madonna *Power Of Goodbye* and Seal *Knock On Wood* were slightly more demanding in terms of the musical parts and the production techniques used than the previous year's choices.

There was some very good quality work at the higher end, with candidates clearly relishing the challenge and producing work that showed success in re-creating the original accurately with good handling of musical and production requirements.

The majority of work fell into the Adequate or Good holistic descriptors (refer to the mark scheme in the Specification document) and displayed several of the weaknesses highlighted above.

At the lower end of submissions, the Madonna track in particular caused many problems for these weaker candidates, and glaring errors in basic pitch and rhythm were common. In the Seal track, interpretations of the brass and drum parts tended to be the difficult areas.

Some commonly occurring features, good and bad, are listed below:

Power Of Goodbye

- mistakes in chord pattern change at end of phrase
- struggles with the correct pad and echo synth inversions
- wrong bassline
- arpeggio synth incorrect – examiners were instructed to be lenient in the interpretation as it is hard to work out the precise figures used in the original, but many were so far out it could only be seen as an error
- only one acoustic guitar part
- single notes in instrumental section strings part instead of chords
- pad/arp synth missing or inaudible in some sections
- timbre choice was generally fairly good though when parts are missing this affects the timbre mark
- filter shaping of the arp and pad synths was attempted quite often though not always with much success; filtering on the echo synth was rare
- hi-hat/drum fills and synth fx were often attempted to a degree and met with some success
- velocity shaping to create suitable articulation of hi-hats, string lines, tremolo guitar was usually considered
- dynamic variations were often fairly clumsy, few candidates managed to re-create suitable lifts and falls in the overall dynamic at appropriate points
- vocal capture was usually handled quite well, though the reverb and occasional delays were often unconvincing and EQ often too dull
- a few rare cases of this song being sung by a male vocalist. Transposition of the original to a more suitable key might have yielded better results

Knock on Wood

- brass voicing was often incomplete/inaccurate; missing baritone or wrong timbre common
- articulation on bass often inaccurate – too legato indicating over-reliance on step entry
- detail in organ ad libs, drum fills, and the brass outro rarely present
- missing backing vocals; no or poor attempt at lo-fi BVs
- extra percussion in the outro often missing or inaccurate
- little shaping the sustained notes in the brass in a realistic way
- other large scale dynamic variations for link sections and bridge rarely received attention
- velocity shaping on hi-hats, drum fills, brass parts, bass usually received some attention
- bass slides often attempted
- as with the Madonna song, vocal capture was usually reasonably good but suffered from a lack of decent compression and EQ

Task 3B: Multi-track Recording

Headlines

- In most cases, this resulted in the best response of the three tasks
- Some very impressive, high quality recordings are being produced
- Capture of instruments was usually handled well
- Mix and production aspects tended to be less well executed than capture
- The tendency for massive over-compression and driving of levels beyond clipping seems to be decreasing slightly
- Some poor choices are being made to accommodate the acoustic instrument/percussion requirements, including modification of the stimulus for no good reason

Choice of song

Some of the best entries used stimuli that contained brass sections, or rock songs with acoustic guitar, tambourine or shaker, and worked to re-create the sound and production of the original. The most successful entries chose material that was within the capabilities of the candidates (or other available musicians) in terms of performance.

Less successful choices included big band recordings with large horn sections that were mostly or entirely recorded in one room. This approach limits the ability to use processing tools to enhance the mix, and depends greatly on the acoustic of the room, interplay between microphones and how well this is managed on the recording, which is often not particularly well. Another common approach was to adapt or re-arrange classic rock or pop songs to incorporate percussion – djembe or bongos plus cowbell, tambourine and/or shakers seems to be a popular choice. This creates a number of problems – arrangements using these instruments are often not handled well, the playing is often of a questionable standard, and they become hard to blend

and balance in the mix. If they are not in the original, there is usually a good reason it.

Some centres still ask large numbers of candidates to record the same song for Task 3B. There is potential for malpractice from the sharing of audio files if this approach is taken. Furthermore, it should be noted that candidates must plan and execute a recording project of their own devising, making decisions about how to capture the instruments. It appears that in some centre candidates use exactly the same microphone choice and placements for all recordings, which is not in keeping with the requirements of the task.

Capture

There is continuing evidence that centres are paying more attention to the recording environment, addressing the problems of recording in a classroom without treatment - even a simple duvet behind the vocalist helps. Some centres have obtained acoustic treatment to further control the recording environment.
There was good work on backing vocal capture in particular, also acoustic guitars, and less incidence of poor kit capture due to poor acoustic environments.
Some of the least successful recordings were of strings and pianos, both of which represent challenging tasks.

The use of amp modelling units for electric guitar capture seems to be declining, possibly as centres realise the advantages in capturing the sound of even a modest amp often yields better results.

Noise was more of a problem than it should be using modern digital equipment - usually careless distortion, top and tail of file or extraneous noise on acoustic guitars, etc. Low level masters were also assessed in this component, and continue to be a regular problem.

Processing

EQ is one of the areas where there are often several significant misjudgements. The best candidates work showed that they had understood that cutting frequencies is often better than boosting. Many others used extreme settings that showed no real understanding of correct use. Dynamics processing was also often clumsily handled, with over-compression being common, particularly with bass and drums. Vocal compression was usually handled better, with some good work being seen in this area. Successful compression across the whole mix was unusual, and use of gates very rare. Poorly applied limiting to masters and poor use of multiband compression seemed to be slightly less of a problem than in previous years. FX was often limited to reverb use, often with errors in judging amounts or matching ambience across the whole mix. Other FX use was rare, apart from electric guitar.

Mixing

Balance of instruments was often done fairly well, but there were usually a few difficulties in placing at least some of the parts effectively. Problems frequently arose with vocal parts, drums, bass & kick drum, and while some examples of automation to control levels at suitable points were seen, many submissions could have benefited from this technique.

There was some impressive work in blends of similar instruments such as backing vocals and horn sections, with percussion being the least successful.

Panning approaches were often sensible, with drum overheads handled well and suitable instruments placed centrally, though a few misjudgements often occurred such as instruments placed too wide in the mix and becoming isolated. Percussion was another common difficult area for this.

Acoustic Instrument/Microphone count/Track count requirements

Quite a number of entries did not fulfil these requirements, which has a negative impact on the marks awarded. Examiners apply an adjustment based on subtracting $1/12^{th}$ for each missing track or instrument.

Task 3C: Composing Using Music Technology

Headlines

- Some very good work showing understanding of style and development of ideas
- Some entries showed very good ability to be creative with a range of sound design and manipulation techniques and combine it with imaginative, stylistic composition
- A larger number candidates ignored the expectation to explore sound design as an element of their work
- Attention to general music production techniques often lacking – severe over-compression, distorted master, crude EQ and poor balance
- Musical elements were often lacking control and development. Simplistic repeated patterns were common

Responses to the briefs

The set text brief (And 2morrow by Tupac) was the most popular for the first time ever. The political commentary brief was noticeably more popular than the advert brief.

In brief 1 'Li Fone' the candidates often failed to use the musical logo as a motif for development in the different ads. The range of scenarios were usually represented with some success. Very few submissions of this task were of excellent or outstanding quality. There was often little tech use in these submissions.

Brief 2 'And 2morrow' saw a number of different approaches – rock band-type song with several live parts; rap-based vocals, sometimes using the R'n'B approach of having a sung refrain as contrast; heavily manipulated vocals, often spoken but chopped, glitched and effected to produce new timbres. The first approach saw some stylish work, but usually lacked any use of technology so lost marks. The second and third approaches produced some very good work at the top end, with great exploration of the technology and imaginative electronic sound palettes.
Brief 3 'Economy of Truth' often suffered from candidates misinterpreting the brief, and selecting samples based on general politicians' speeches rather than actually focusing a particular scandal. Many just had a collection of quotes by politicians talking about war. The assumption seemed to be that anything a politician said was a scandal. The responses exploited technology as a natural result of using samples, with mixed success. Poor quality samples from YouTube often made the task difficult, but there was some successful and stylish work that exploited technology in a variety of ways.

Musical elements

It was unusual to see work that displayed a real command of compositional processes, with style, variety and flow. Most pieces depended too much on repetition. Quite a large number of pieces were very basic, and struggled to make sense of the musical conventions of melody, harmony, rhythm.

The use of loops from sequencing software or libraries, displays a lack of creative input (particularly for beats) and will not gain credit unless there is further manipulation.

More attention was often needed in management of the limited time frame (3 minutes) to create an interesting and well balanced composition.

A small number of submissions failed to use the minimum number of parts. In these cases an adjustment was applied by subtracting $1/6^{th}$ of the total mark for each missing part.

Administration

A large number of centres were contacted for either replacement CDs due to errors or supply of the wrong format, or for signatures on logbooks, delaying the marking of candidates' work. While it is understood by the examining team that CD errors do occur, all CDs should be checked for playback in a standard CD player (not computer CD drive).

A small minority of centres were very careless with the CDs, submitting work that had clearly not been checked and where mixes started or stopped halfway through, or vocals were left out of the Integrated Sequence mix. Examiners contacted centres in these cases to request replacements which, it should be noted, there is no obligation to do, and usually the correct mix was supplied on the replacement, though sometimes the same or a even a more error-prone submission was received.

Some of the email addresses given by teachers were incorrect, again delaying the communication between examiner and centre. It is appreciated when centres deal with any problems swiftly and efficiently. Replacement items were swift to arrive in the vast majority of cases.

Some centres work arrived significantly late. This creates further inconvenience and can potentially lead to publication of results being delayed.

Centres should refer to the *Administrative Support Guide* (formerly *Instructions for the Conduct of the Examinations* document) that is available on the GCE Music Technology website under *Assessment Materials/ Instructions for the Conduct of the Examinations*.
This document should be read in conjunction with the Specification.

Grade Boundaries
Grade boundaries for this, and all other papers, can be found on the website on this link:
http://www.edexcel.com/iwantto/Pages/grade-boundaries.aspx

Further copies of this publication are available from
Edexcel Publications, Adamsway, Mansfield, Notts, NG18 4FN

Telephone 01623 467467
Fax 01623 450481
Email publication.orders@edexcel.com
Order Code US028507 June 2011

For more information on Edexcel qualifications, please visit
www.edexcel.com/quals

Pearson Education Limited. Registered company number 872828
with its registered office at Edinburgh Gate, Harlow, Essex CM20 2JE